

Making the Family – Marriage within and across Borders
Andrew Bruce
IOM Regional Representative
South East Asia

Dear Participants,

I will present on Marriage of South East Asian women, particularly Vietnamese women, to East Asian men. I have divided my presentation into 7 main areas:

The Socio-demographic background of those marrying
Push factors for these marriages
The conflicting interests of women and men in these marriages
Women's agency
The challenges of Integration of the women into the husband's society
The Brokerage system under which these marriages are arranged, and
Recommendations

The Socio-demographic background of those marrying

First some quick statistics to set the scene

- During the period 1995 – 2002 some 64,000 Vietnamese women married foreign men, 94% of who were Taiwanese or South Korean.
- In 2003 more than 13,000 international marriages were registered in Vietnam of which 11,000 were with Taiwanese men and 1,400 with Korean men
- In 2006 more than 10,000 Vietnamese women married Korean men, a seven fold increase in three years.

With regard to the socio economic background of those marrying

- Most of the women are from the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam and are generally in the age range of 18-25 whereas the men are significantly older.
- The men are in general considerably better educated than the women and the most common occupations for both parties are manual laborer, farmer, technical worker and domestic worker.

Push factors for these marriages

The economic benefits, particularly remittances from these women when they are living abroad, are a survival strategy for poor families in Vietnam. This is also the primary motivator for labor migration from the country and the region. In Vietnam remittances are a vital source of income for many families, and are used particularly to cover the cost of daily subsistence, health care, and education.

Culture is a factor in these marriages in that there are family pressures and expectations of the women. Daughters are brought up to accept that they have a duty to the family, and if necessary must sacrifice for it. There is also the concept of fate; that this is the lot of a daughter. Another gender perspective is that women, apart from marrying for economic reasons, also desire a more egalitarian marriage, and freedom from local patriarchal gender norms. Foreign men from developed countries represent liberal ideas – freedom, individualism, openness and independence. They are seen as “modern” husbands who guarantee Western values. Korean soap operas, popular in south east Asian countries, contribute to this belief. Through international marriage women hope to enter into an understanding and egalitarian marriage, difficult to achieve with a Vietnamese man in Vietnam.

While in some destination countries these marriages can be more culturally egalitarian, the power dynamics between the husband and wife usually override this.

Culture, and desire for gender equality, ironically both encourage these cross border marriages in that family pressure and sense of sacrifice are push factors whereas the possibility of a more equal and less patriarchal marriage is a pull factor.

Conflicting interests of women and men in these marriages

As I have just mentioned, Vietnamese women aspire to a more egalitarian and ‘modern’ married life, hoping that they will enter a marriage with more ‘Western’ values. East Asian men who travel to Vietnam to find a wife however, tend to seek women with more ‘traditional’ values, which often includes passivity, family-oriented married life, and conservative ideals of sexuality. This contradiction, if unresolved, can become a source of tension in the marriage.

Women’s agency

Various factors are needed for one to possess and exercise agency.

To possess agency at the individual level, self esteem is a critical factor, the way women value themselves and do not see themselves as merely a daughter to be sacrificed for the family, that they will not undergo a humiliating selection process through marriage brokers, and they do not see themselves as a commodity to be sold, but instead demand dignity and respect. To possess agency they must also have the communication skills to negotiate for their interests and wants with their family and partner. They must also understand the possible risks involved in marrying and going aboard, and be capable of taking steps to minimize their impact, should they occur.

When one has agency at the individual level, there must be an enabling environment to allow one to exercise that agency. For example social services must be available to these women in the destination country; they must be allowed equal rights by law; a wife must be able to physically go to and access social services without interference from her husband or parents-in-law; she must have access to the rule of law including the right to

obtain a divorce and custody of a child; she must also have the social status to bargain for her rights, needs and wants within the family and with her partner, and she must be empowered enough to make decisions affecting her life and family, and have the opportunity to choose her husband and not be part of a bride selection process.

In cross border marriage we see opposite portrayals of women; as victim and as agent.

Domestic violence and maltreatment are issues; with women sometimes trafficked into these marriages, and we often see in the media, sensational stories of pervasive domestic violence and isolation of 'marriage migrants' in destination countries.

So there is this one-dimensional depiction of women purely as victims, and it is true that their young age, inexperience, lack of knowledge and education, do make them easily exploitable. These women are also susceptible to "a triple mode of oppression" – class, gender and ethnicity.

However we also see them portrayed as proactive agents; as choosing marriage as a strategy to obtain a better life for themselves and their families, and brave enough to enter a new world. In the extreme they are even seen as taking advantage of men; the concept of a "gold-digger"

So the distinction between victim and agent is often unclear and complex. These women are taking an opportunity; have the courage to take a risk and migrate for marriage however they have few other options to escape poverty, and are 'pushed' by socioeconomic circumstances. These socioeconomic circumstances and distance created by 'marriage migration' serve both as sources of empowerment and disempowerment in that distance gives the women increased freedom from conventional and patriarchal norms in their country of origin but they are also more vulnerable due to the lack of support from their natal families and social networks. 'Fate' also blurs the level of agency involved as some women see that it is their fate and they are resigned to whether they will end up in a happy or unhappy marriage. What seems to be a proactive choice may in fact be the outcome of gendered cultural influence on these women.

Integration & Challenges

Residence and citizenship rights in destination country are crucial in order for the women to avoid being deported to their countries of origin or becoming illegal residents, deprived of social welfare benefits and security. It also allows them to participate politically, as citizens.

Gendered laws in destination countries are an impediment to integration with these wives not given their own legal status but considered dependents of their husbands. Women must wait several years to obtain the right to live in their husband's country as an independent person, and they are vulnerable during this time. If they are suffering violence or maltreatment at the hands of their husbands many take the abuse rather than risk losing eligibility for residence. Should they choose divorce during this waiting

period it will probably preclude them from obtaining a residence visa, and they may be deported. Also their status is as wife, not independent worker or citizen, thereby excluding them from the public sphere.

The Brokerage system

In Vietnam, marriage brokerage involving payment of fees is forbidden by law, with only non-profit agencies permitted to operate in this space, however it is estimated that more than 50 Taiwanese and Korean agencies are operating in the country covertly. In fact it is estimated that 90% of these marriages are arranged by brokers.

This system works in the following way:

In Vietnam a local woman, or her family, decides she should marry a Taiwanese or South Korean man. In some cases local matchmakers solicit these women. Upon choosing the destination country, the woman is sent to the matchmaker's house or to a hotel, usually in Ho Chi Minh City, where she stays with about 100 other women undergoing the same process.

At the same time, in Korea or Taiwan, brokerage agencies, liaising with those in Vietnam, organize a trip for the prospective husbands to Vietnam, with usually three to five men in a group.

Once in Vietnam the broker organizes a meeting between the prospective husbands and 100-150 women, usually at a hotel. At this viewing the men consider each woman for five to ten minutes with an interpreter present. The appearance is usually the key selection criteria the men use. After various rounds of the selection process, each man chooses one woman as his bride. The process is normally completed in one day. If the woman is discontent with the result, the broker pressures her to accept the man. Women very rarely refuse. Each couple is then encouraged to spend a night together. The next day, they visit the bride's home and arrange for a full wedding ceremony. The couple is then interviewed at the consulate or embassy of the man's country. Once this is completed the man usually returns home while the woman waits for the broker to obtain the passport and visa. The visa can be a spouse or tourist visa, and after the receipt of the visa the woman travels to be united with her new husband.

This is a costly process for the man, who pays up to USD 16,000 for the package, including airfare and hotel in Vietnam. The local and foreign brokerage agencies take 70-80% of the amount, while the bride's family receives 20-30%. In some cases the woman's family also pays a fee ranging from USD 500-1,500 to the broker to arrange the marriage. Poor households are known to borrow money for this purpose in the hope that remittances from their daughter, once she has settled in her husband's country, will far exceed the short-term economic hardship this imposes on them, and in many cases it does.

In the interests of time brides often depart on a tourist visa as obtaining a spouse visa while they are still in Vietnam takes much longer.

There is real concern that this system commodifies women. The matchmaking process resembles a beauty contest; with men choosing the women based on appearance, and has little desire or time to get to know them. The women are often asked to participate in meetings with the men in their underwear and men can ask personal questions of the women, while the women are not allowed to do so of the men. In fact little personal information regarding the prospective husband is given to the women and sometimes the information that is provided is distorted or inaccurate.

Informal gynecological examinations are frequently conducted to verify the woman's virginity. Selected women rarely have any other option but accept the marriage, and are subject to pressure by the brokers to do so. I heard one story of a woman who wanted to withdraw from the arrangement while waiting for her visa but the agent told her that her family would have to pay him USD 5,000 to cover his costs if she pulled out, so she went ahead with it.

It is interesting to note here for those of us concerned about the issue of human trafficking, that this process, in some instances, constitute trafficking. The UN Protocol stipulates that the consent of a victim is irrelevant if part of the process is carried out by the use of fraud, of deception, or of the abuse of power of a person of vulnerability.

Some recommendations

In the short and medium terms:

1. Governments should bring these marriages under a legal, transparent, monitored system.
2. Receiving countries should consider shortening the length of time necessary for the women to obtain permanent residence permits and citizenship in their new country.
3. Receiving countries should increase the social outreach to women in these marriages to help prevent domestic abuse and loneliness.
4. The school systems in receiving countries need to ensure that children of these marriages do not fall behind and drop out, as lack of education coupled with discrimination has the potential to produce gangs of angry young men and women who feel shunned by society.

In the long term

1. Governments need to provide opportunities to communities to minimize their need to resort to cross-border marriage to alleviate poverty. Included in these opportunities could be diversified livelihood options. Many of the women entering into these marriages come from the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam which is threatened by rising sea levels, so even in this issue, climate change intrudes.
2. Women and girls should be empowered, and gender equality pursued by governments

3. Over time the notion of sacrifice and commoditization of girls and women needs to be changed.

Thank you.